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ABSTRACT

After-school care for children of working parents is a natural extension of the services schools provide. Setting up a school-based child care program requires making the commitment and establishing a task force that collects relevant information about the community, its needs, and opportunities for meeting needs. Programs are operated by the schools themselves; in collaboration with other groups; and by separate groups. Among the areas to be considered are state licensing requirements for day care centers, financial arrangements, eligibility standards, setting fees, and program evaluation. School systems interested in starting school-based child care programs should establish comprehensive administrative regulations that outline costs, use of space, operational supervision, and other administrative details. The board should review those regulations carefully and should have final approval before any program is implemented. Five resources to help boards research and begin a school-based child care program are cited. (MLF)

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Some offer piano lessons, some remedial instruction. Some are administered by local service agencies, some by the schools themselves. Some operate before school, some after regular school hours—and some do both. Some meet one day a week for an hour or two, others meet daily.

They are school-based child care programs, often referred to as extended-day programs or school-age child care (SACC). And, while they may operate in different ways, they all began because school-based child care serves the best interests of both school and community.

Why school involvement?

Schools, the most prominent of all institutions dealing with children, command a significant portion of local and state budgets. When the school system is perceived as sensitive and responsive to special community needs, the entire community's attitude toward the schools becomes more positive.

A school that provides a school-based child care program is responding to the needs of parents in the community. The bonus is that a high degree of parental involvement in after-school programs leads to increased involvement by parents in other school activities.

Changing conditions

The "traditional" American family composed of working father, homemaker mother, and children is vanishing. Only five to eleven percent of all American households now fit this pattern. In 1980, 31 million children (53 percent of all children under 18 living in families) had mothers who worked or were seeking work.

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Many of these children stay in day care centers—some of which are glorified baby sitting services at best. A shortage of day care centers nationwide, minimal standards for their operation, fee schedules that make them too costly for many working parents, and publicity about cases of child abuse and neglect at some day care facilities result in, what many consider, an unsatisfactory alternative: latchkey children.

Latchkey children are at home for several hours a day, alone or in the care of a slightly older brother or sister. Some studies of these self-care arrangements argue that concern for their negative effects are premature and may not even be warranted. Children may enjoy being alone and demonstrating responsible behavior. For those whose parents work nearby and are easily accessible by telephone, the fears, of both parents and children, may be minimized.

Negative effects

Others argue, however, that children who regularly spend many hours each day without supervision, experience more depression, fear, and loneliness. Lack of supervision leads to poor self-esteem, which may in turn lead to poor school performance.

In fact, the 1987 Louis Harris/Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher revealed that 51 percent of 1,000 teachers polled consider latchkey situations to be more detrimental to student learning than poverty or single-parent families. As important, the poll found that the problem crossed socio-economic lines and was critical in urban, suburban, and rural communities. And 59 percent of the 2,000 parents polled said that children were left on their own too often; 41 percent said their child was often left unsupervised from after school until 5:30 p.m.

Clearly, after-school care for children of working parents is a critical issue in today's society. It affects entire communities as well as parents. Violence committed by and against children, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and adolescent suicide are among the nation's major concerns. Children need adequate supervision after school that includes healthy activities to develop their minds and bodies. School systems can ignore the problem or they can become part of the solution.

Initial steps

The first step in setting up a school-based child care program is to make the commitment. For school leaders, that means a commitment to keeping an open mind, to studying the research, and to taking the risk.

Next, establish a task force. School systems that want to provide extended-day programs must approach the issue in an organized fashion. A community task force can conduct a community needs assessment, identify the scope of the problem, decide the mechanisms for delivering the services, and plan program coordination and evaluation.

The task force should find out what other school systems are doing. Successful programs exist, for example, in Alabama, South Carolina, Arizona, Colorado, and Massachusetts, to name a few. Reinventing the wheel does not make sense when others already have learned what works and what doesn't, as well as the conditions that foster success.

Collect information

It is essential that the task force collect relevant information about the community, its needs, and opportunities for meeting needs. Successful programs

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are tailored to the specific needs of the communities they serve. This information should include:

- What are the trends in the community? Have the number of working mothers increased and are they likely to continue to increase? What about the number of single-parent families?
- Is school enrollment declining? If so, is it because of a declining birth rate, migration, or an increasing dissatisfaction with public schools? If the latter, what would promote satisfaction?
- Is unused space available in schools?

Check out available resources and develop an action plan. Parents, staff members, community leaders, and community service organizations all can provide information on the child care needs of the community.

Pros and cons

Be prepared to tackle the pros and cons. Detractors may argue that care is beyond the traditional jurisdiction of schools. The use of school facilities might upset the teachers whose rooms are used, or the public may fear the cost that would fall to taxpayers for keeping facilities open longer and paying qualified staff.

Those with experience in operating extended-day programs say, however, that formerly reluctant administrators become ardent supporters of the programs. They have found that the problems can be worked out and that the benefits—to school, teachers, community, and children—far outweigh the disadvantages. Nevertheless, the school board must deal with all of these issues before an extended-day school program can be operated successfully.

Who benefits?

School-based child care programs should benefit students. They allow children to remain in safe and familiar surroundings. But successful programs also capitalize on the interests of the children enrolled.

Should the program offer karate, foreign languages, arts and crafts, athletics, or cooking? Should staff members help with homework or provide remedial work in reading and math?

Before opting for any particular activity, consider the range of experiences it can provide. Allow for spontaneity; be cautious about program rigidity. Balance the day's activities, allowing for structured and unstructured events. Emphasize an integrated approach to learning.

School-based child care programs also should benefit parents by giving them peace of mind about their children's welfare. Buildings are safe, trained staff are available, and transportation problems are reduced or eliminated. If children can complete their homework during the afternoon program, they can spend time with their parents in recreational and enriching evening activities.

The program also should benefit schools. School vandalism may be reduced because children are busy after school and because buildings are occupied for a greater part of the day. Appreciative parents become strong advocates for the school system and are more likely to support funding increases. Schools can maintain or increase enrollments by attracting or retaining students who might otherwise attend nonpublic schools or schools in other districts.

The program also should benefit the community. School-based child care programs can be a cost-effective use of existing public resources and may even produce revenue to offset school system expenses. Some programs regenerate grandparent interest in the schools or create a bridge from schools to childless people in the community by involving them as volunteers. Additionally, such programs may be a deterrent to vandalism and delinquency.

Operating procedures

Some extended-day programs are designed and administered by a separate parent group as a private, not-for-profit corporation. Others are operated by community agencies, groups of parents (including PTA and PTO), preschool day care centers, or governmental agencies. Some are operated by the schools themselves—as the sole administering group or as collaborators or partners with other groups. Whatever the format, the decision about who will run the program must be made early.

Also essential to consider are the state licensing requirements for day care centers. Staff training and safety code regulations may differ from those for schools. Often, partnership arrangements between schools and private, nonprofit agencies allow for more flexible personnel policies, thus reducing conflicts between service needs and teacher needs.

A South Carolina program administered by a governmental agency, however, uses teachers from the schools in the extended-day program to the program's advantage. Teachers have the chance to enjoy the children away from the classroom and the pressure of basic skills monitoring and adherence to adopted curricula. The children get to know—and like—the teachers outside the classroom.

School-operated programs

Programs operated by schools give the school system complete control over all aspects of the program including facilities, staff, and curriculum. But, if the programs are administered by the schools, consider:

- How will the financial arrangements be handled? Are the employees also school system employees who are subject to statutory provisions or negotiated agreements? If custodial personnel are scheduled to work during the extended-day program, how is the overtime wage apportioned?
- Should extended-day programs be coordinated with school activities and curriculum?
- Is there state legislation that enables school systems to provide such programs?

Other concerns

If the programs are not administered by the schools, several questions still must

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be considered. For example, what is the school's accountability for ensuring that the program is affordable, convenient, reliable, and a regulated environment for children? Clearly, a poorly run program will not enhance the school's image in the community.

Also, what about liability for personnel employed, supervision of children, and maintenance of equipment and facilities? To what extent will the board or district employees be liable for the actions of the agency administering the program? Liability and immunity laws differ from state to state. The school board attorney should review these matters closely before the school system implements any extended-day program.

In addition, determine what space is available in schools. Sharing space can be difficult. It requires a close working relationship between the regular classroom teacher and child care staff. If the programs are not administered by the schools, determine who will pay for utilities and how costs will be determined. Also consider what priority such programs should have for use of school facilities and whether such use conflicts with existing policies on use of school facilities and equipment?

Other questions to resolve are: Who will pay for maintenance of the facilities and equipment? Will school supplies be used? Who will handle publicity?

All of these questions and others need to be resolved before a program is implemented. Regardless of who operates the program, it should run in accordance with guidelines adopted by the school board. These guidelines should be developed with input from the community task force, but the board has the final responsibility—and authority—for implementing the program.

Eligibility standards

The assessment of community needs should give clues to the population that will be served by the school-based center. But, will enrollment be on a first-come, first-served basis? Will preference be given to children with working parents . . . to children who enroll for all five days? Will children with special needs be served, or will they be referred to an appropriate community agency?

And what financial arrangements will be made for children whose families cannot afford the tuition? Does your community survey indicate that children from low-income families would benefit most from school-based care? Will a scholarship fund be established with donations from business and industry in the community?

Other considerations are: Will there be academic standards for enrollment in certain enrichment programs, or will students who need remediation be required to participate in a remediation program? Will the school system's code of conduct, including suspension from participation, apply to students enrolled in the program?

Monitor and evaluate

Clearly stated goals and objectives for the program will enable you to assess whether the objectives need revising or whether the goals need to be changed because of changing conditions and needs within the community. An application form that solicits information on reasons for enrollment, schedule needs, and program interests can be useful in monitoring changing patterns. Also, a parent survey can elicit satisfaction with the program as well as concerns and unmet needs.

A program tailored to one school may not work in another. A program that began as after-school care may expand to include before school, summer school, or a whole-day program for children of staff or a program to accommodate children in part-day programs, such as half-day kindergarten. This year participants may want computers; next year, they may ask for ballet. Be prepared to change—but not to abandon—the program as needs change.

Establish fees

In South Carolina, the Sumter District 17 program costs $15 per child per week. A second child in the same family costs an additional $10. Another school system charges $40 per month for one child, $30 for the second child in the family, and $20 per month per child for additional children. Other school systems charge by the day or by the hour.

In setting fees, consider that personnel costs and the type of program offered are the primary cost factors. Additional expenses may include utilities and publications, such as promotional brochures, application forms, and parent handbooks. Contributions of public school space and the cost of custodial services increase use of tax-supported school facilities, but reduce the child care costs to parents. Tuition costs, set at a realistic rate, attract parents to the program and enable the program to be self-supporting, requiring no direct use of school tax dollars.

Focus on children

The primary task of schools is to serve the needs of children through the combination of resources, skills, and knowledge that are available in every community. After-school care for children of working parents is a natural extension of the services schools provide. The involvement of schools in child care has meant, and will continue to mean, that thousands of children will have access to convenient, reasonably priced services both before and after school. ■

If you want to start a program . . .

School systems interested in starting school-based child care programs should establish comprehensive administrative regulations that outline costs, use of space, operational supervision, and a host of other administrative details. The board should review those regulations carefully, and should have final approval before any program is implemented.

Resources are available to help your board research and begin a school-based child care program. They include:

- *School Age Child Care: A Legal Manual for Public School Administrators* by Abby J. Cohen. The School Age Child Care Project, Wellesley College, 828 Washington St., Wellesley, Mass. 02181 ($25.00).
- *Public Education and Day Care: One district's story* by Carol M. Hoffman. Tecnomic Publishing Co., Lancaster, Pa. ($18.00).
- *Day Care in the Public Schools* (Leadership Report). National School Boards Association, 1680 Duke St., Alexandria, Va. 22314 ($9.00).
- *School Age Child Care: An Action Manual* by Borden, Genser, Levine and Seligson. Auburn House Publishing Co., 14 Dedham St., Dover, Mass. 02030-0658 ($16.95).
- *Starting School Age Day Care: What are the Considerations?* Davidson County School Age Day Care Task Force, Nashville, Tenn.